

THE SOLITARY HOUSE

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The Solitary House by E. R. Punshon

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E. R. PUNSHON

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HOUSE**

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BY
E. R. PUNSHON



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CONTENTS

PART I

- I KEITH NORTON ON THE ROAD 9
- II THE DESERTED HOME 18
- III A VISITOR 27
- IV THE VICAR 37
- V THE HIDDEN STORE 47
- VI TEMPTATION 58
- VII THE BROKEN BICYCLE 68

PART II

- VIII WHAT THE NURSE SAW 83
- IX ESME'S QUESTIONS 93
- X SUMMER DAYS 103
- XI A BRIDE 112
- XII TWO DAYS 122
- XIII THEIR DECISION 132
- XIV NEW-COMERS 142

PART III

- XV CAPTURED 153
- XVI THE GRAVE 163
- XVII THE WENTWORTHS 172
- XVIII THE BURNT WILL 181
- XIX THE HIDDEN JEWELLERY 191

Contents

- XX A NEW MYSTERY 201
XXI WHAT KEITH FOUND 211

PART IV

- XXII WAITING 223
XXIII THE POLICE ARRIVE 233
XXIV THE SEARCH 243
XXV FILES WOOD AT NIGHT 252
XXVI TREE TOPS 263
XXVII A STRANGE NEST 271
XXVIII THE HOUSE ROOF 280
XXIX THE EXPLANATION 289

CHAPTER I

Keith Norton on the Road

It made a pretty picture, as he, limping down the long road, came upon it suddenly at a turn in the path he was following; and since even a tramp may admire a view if he will, just as a cat may look at a king, Keith Norton paused for a moment to look and to admire.

He was tired, too, and glad to rest for a moment, for he had walked five-and-twenty miles that day, and the ache in his weary limbs reminded him of the times when he had believed every tramp to be a lazy vagabond anxious only to escape work.

The house that made the centre of the landscape he had paused to admire was not a large one, but it was picturesquely situated on the slope of the hill against the large dark masses of surrounding woods that were now in the full glory of their summer foliage. Above it was the crest of the hill, and at a little distance a small stream ran for a space from the spring in the open where it rose to lose itself in the recesses of the wood as though

suddenly afraid and seeking shelter there. The house faced due west, so that, as now the day was drawing to its close, the full rays of the declining sun shone upon it, showing every detail clearly and making its windows shine as though they were of molten gold.

Perhaps to some degree the appeal that it made to the solitary watcher by the wayside lay in the fact that it was the first sign of human habitation he had seen for some hours, and after the bareness of the close-cropped inhospitable downs, barren and void of all save an occasional flock of sheep, this little house nestling in the trees on the green hill-side had for him a very attractive air.

"Pretty little place," he said presently and moved on, for it was late and he was seeking shelter, and he noticed that he had not gone many yards when the cottage on the hill-side vanished entirely from his sight.

The effect was a little startling. One moment it was there in full view, the next it had vanished as though, like the little brook, it had fled into the woods for shelter. Though Keith was in no mood to interest himself in trifles, or to take an unnecessary step out of his way, he turned back to see how it was this happened, and was aware indeed of an odd feeling of doubt and hesitation that made him anxious to assure himself the house was really there

and actually existent. For when one has had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours and not much for two or three days previously, one's eyes and brain are apt to play queer tricks.

But the house was still there, plain and solid on the hill-side, and the effect of sudden disappearance was caused merely by a bend in the road that chanced to correspond with a sweep forward of the line of trees upon the hill. But now his attention was drawn to it Keith noticed that much the same thing occurred as one came down the road the other way, which was why the house had the effect of appearing with such dramatic suddenness. In fact, it was visible only at one point upon the road, and now as Keith watched the pretty little house solitary upon the hill-side it seemed to him to take on an aspect secret and aloof, as though it had deliberately chosen that site in order to be well hidden from prying eyes.

"Bit odd," Keith thought to himself and resumed his tramp's steady, slouching pace that he knew must bear him a good many miles farther before there would be much chance of getting food or shelter.

It has to be confessed that it was entirely his own fault that Keith Norton, at the age of three-and-twenty, good looking, with bright brown eyes and brown hair with a curl to it many a girl might have

envied, gifted with good health, first-class muscles, and a brain of fully average quality, was at this moment a ragged tramp, hungry and homeless. The death of his father without means had closed the University to him in his second year, so that he had to leave without taking his degree, and friends had obtained for him quite a good position in a well-known, highly respected, and old-established house of business where he had only to be punctual in attendance, cultivate a neat handwriting, and make no mistakes in adding up, to be sure of a fair salary all his life, and with even before him the prospect of rising in due course of seniority to be head of his room and sit apart in a glass-enclosed compartment, a little like a fat goldfish in an aquarium.

But unfortunately Keith Norton was not so punctual as he should have been, his handwriting was deplorable—he had learnt both it and his spelling at one of our historic public schools, so no more need be said on that score—and to add up figures correctly bored him to distraction. The end came when one fine spring morning he went for a walk in the country, totally forgetting that such places as dingy old offices in the city even existed. Naturally his connection with one dingy old office ceased abruptly, and after a somewhat solemn week-end spent in considering the position,